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\$15M grant to provide high-tech job skills training in mid-Mich.

By Jeremy W. Steele
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A \$15 million federal grant will launch an accelerated nursing program at Lansing Community College and biofuels refinery equipment education by Michigan State University.

Officials said Monday the three-year grant links programs in 13 counties from Lansing to Flint to Saginaw in the Mid-Michigan Innovation Alliance, which aims to retrain workers beginning this summer in health care, alternative energy, entrepreneurship and advanced manufacturing activities.

The effort is among the first projects of former Lansing Mayor David Hollister's Prima Civitas Foundation, a regional economic development group launched this year with Michigan State University.

Low-skill jobs are being eliminated and even high-skill jobs can no longer be counted on for lifetime employment, Hollister said.

"That's a big challenge," he said. "We're just going to have to make it clear. This is the new economy of five to six careers (in a lifetime), so we have to commit to lifelong training."

The regional program encompasses an area with 1.7 million workers, he said.

It's hoped the new programs can retrain workers such as those being idled by Federal-Mogul Corp. in new careers, MSU President Lou Anna Simon said.

Training programs

Among the components of the Mid-Michigan Innovation Alliance:

- Michigan State University will lead efforts to promote bio-based products and technologies, including training on refinery equipment for ethanol and biodiesel production.
- Lansing Community College and the Greater Flint Health Coalition will train workers in the health care sector, including nurses and health care aides.
- LCC and Saginaw Valley State University will offer entrepreneurship training.
- Kettering University in Flint will train teachers in fuel cell technologies and provide graduate education in hybrid technologies.
- Mott Community College in Flint will offer training in the building and construction trades and advanced manufacturing.
- The Center for Automotive Research in Ann Arbor will focus on the "automotive renaissance," helping businesses prepare for diversified, global automotive marketing.

Source: Michigan State University

The Southfield-based auto supplier plans to close its St. Johns plant, which employs 420, by 2008.

Having an educated, highly skilled work force will be important to keep the area's remaining manufacturers and attract new companies, Simon said.

"Go to the (General Motors Corp.) Grand River plant," she said. "There's a new type of skill required for workers in that plant."

LCC will use \$2.4 million from the grant to start several new programs, including a one-year licensed practical nurse program for students who already have bachelor's degrees, said Gary VanKempen, vice president of academic affairs.

The college also will offer training for several other health care jobs, such as nurse aides and phlebotomists, that take relatively little training but are in high demand, he said.

LCC also is working to integrate classes on starting a business into its curriculum and may offer a certificate or degree in entrepreneurship, VanKempen said.

Thirteen regional partnerships across the country received a grant under the U.S. Department of Labor program, which is meant to help areas pressured by the global economy, said Emily Stover DeRocco, assistant secretary of labor for employment and training.

The mid-Michigan proposal stood out because of its regional partnership, including strong community colleges and universities, she said.

"The team that put this proposal together understood the needs, but they also understood the assets of the region and they were able to build a strategy based on those assets," DeRocco said.

But the training programs will not be a quick fix for the economic pains the region is facing, Hollister said. Most businesses created by or attracted to mid-Michigan under this effort will employ a small number of people to start.

"We can lose a plant with 400 jobs overnight," he said. "This is a long-term effort."

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